



Coast Guard Flag Voice 65

ENLISTED ASSIGNMENTS AND GEOGRAPHIC STABILITY

I received a thoughtful question from the field asking me to elaborate on the "liberal extension policy" in Flag Voice 35, which discussed several enlisted assignment policy changes we instituted over the last few years. The member thought he received a different interpretation on the "geographic stability policy" from his Assignment Officer (AO).

What he heard from the AO is the only way an extension request will be approved is if no one else in a higher priority wants the job. The member believes approval should be based on the merits of the requesting member and the CO's endorsement. The mere fact another member simply has a higher assignment priority should not always take precedence in deciding the extension request.

CDR Wayne Parent, Chief, Assignments Branch at the Personnel Command, responded and I thought it would helpful to share his response. The basic question is, "Should we adjust assignment priority in favor of geographic stability?"

"Geographic stability is the goal of most of our senior enlisted personnel. To this end, in assignment year 1999 we extended or moved locally almost 2700 personnel. That said, I'm sure at least another 3000 preferred being extended but weren't. The reason: we have to fill the afloat and arduous billets, and they aren't where personnel want to extend. If we let everyone extend who wanted to, I am fairly certain shore billets in Charleston, St. Petersburg, Portsmouth, and Seattle would be locked up for many years while the cutters in those ports would be severely understaffed. Only a handful of personnel ask to extend afloat each year, usually only on the smaller cutters. This requires us to use a sea-shore rotation process to fill the less desired billets. Cutters have the shortest tour lengths, which creates demand on the assignment system. While a substantially larger number of personnel are assigned ashore due to their longer tour lengths, we do not have enough personnel ready to go afloat each year to meet that demand. To make matters worse, every member who fails to complete a tour aboard a cutter actually removes the possibility of an extension ashore for someone else. As I'm sure you are aware, in some critical rates it has been necessary to short-tour personnel serving ashore to keep the cutters staffed. It has long been Coast Guard policy to share less desired duty among as many personnel as possible, but that policy requires personnel to rotate more frequently than otherwise would be necessary.

One of the few real rewarding incentives we can offer personnel for serving afloat and on arduous duty is assignment priority. We should not circumvent this policy to grant extensions. We do regularly circumvent it to fleet up personnel who are advancing but not tour-complete into new billets. This practice annually generates extensive negative feedback from members afloat who feel they have lost a billet opportunity owed them. We accept that feedback but hold our ground to preserve the advanced

members' shore tour whenever we can. "Whenever we can" means without transferring that person, we have enough normally tour-complete members to fill all the afloat and arduous billets. We need more incentives and rewards for sea duty, not fewer, and this suggestion would remove one of the few we have.

You mentioned personnel not being able to extend in desirable locations affects retention. The reality is many personnel stay around in hopes of getting a tour in a choice billet, and to lock up such billets long-term for a few would cause many more members to depart. Every Coast Guard person has a dream billet.

Your suggestion to bring seniority into assignment decisions probably has some merit, but it is not presently a factor in our system. While I know situations like your example occur, I also receive complaints from major cutter COs on the relatively junior CPOs we assign them and I know that fact also is true. That would seem to indicate seniority has crept into our system as a factor in the assignment process, as the senior CPOs are avoiding duty on the major cutters.

Annually we do extend many senior enlisted. This is the basic process: (1) evaluate our needs among all billets, including the undesirable ones; (2) assign the personnel rotating ashore with a high assignment priority; (3) fill the remaining empty, undesirable billets; and then (4) grant as many extensions as possible among the remaining desirable billets. Unless some other factor, such as performance or special qualifications, comes up, a person with an assignment priority of five would not be able to move another priority five desiring an extension.

This is not a short answer, but the issue you brought up is not a simple one and I want to emphasize we cannot disconnect the issue from our need to provide incentives and rewards for the personnel filling arduous billets, in this case SEA DUTY."

CDR Parent described well the challenges facing us in the assignment process. They are especially acute in an under-strength workforce, which actually increases "churn," i.e., causes us to move people even more often when vacancies occur because we often don't have the extra bodies or even all the billets filled, so just about any vacancy becomes an immediate critical fill.

Given the substantial pressures to efficiently manage the transfer funds account, AOs would like nothing better than to leave everyone in place. However, as CDR Parent described, billets become vacant for many reasons or we absolutely must move people coming off arduous duty and thus we create a daisy chain of assignment fills.

Having said all this, we are moving in various areas to more qualifications-based assignments and some with longer (geo-stable) tours, currently including surfman and new icebreaker CGC HEALY assignments. With the latter, we are making seven-year assignments to the "HEALY program" with three years aboard ship during that assignment. I expect others forthcoming, such as on the new buoy tenders, pending results of the Buoy Tender Systems Study ([see Flag Voice 36](#)). All these should increase stability for families.

Regards, FL Ames



[Flag Voice Contents](#)

This page is maintained by [HR Webmaster \(CG-1A\)](#)